

Mr. Chairman and members of Advisory Committee on Increasing Competitive Employment for Individuals with Disabilities,

I appreciate the opportunity to offer public comments today. I direct a National Federation of the Blind comprehensive residential training center, Blindness: Learning in New Dimensions (BLIND), Inc., located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. We provide skills training for blind people of all ages, including those with additional disabilities. While working age adults constitute the largest segment of our student population, we also provide year-round programming to transition-age youth. A vital part of our summer programming for high school students is a community employment experience which allows the students to put their skills to practice in a paid, (at the minimum wage or more), integrated employment setting prior to the end of the program.

BLIND Inc. supports many of the recommendations and their projected outcomes in the “Transition To Careers” section of the interim report. Area 1, section 7 stresses the importance of “. . . integrated work experiences and related employment services, including internships, apprenticeships and on-the-job-training, along with related career services and counseling . . .” for youth with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities “. . . **prior to exiting high school.**” The fact that the Transition To Careers Subcommittee states in the intro to their preliminary recommendations that “. . . active interagency collaboration and coordination keyed to the outcome of competitive integrated employment (CIE), must be improved” is a vital step towards meaningful, integrated employment outcomes for students with disabilities. The responsible phase out of sheltered/sub-minimum wage environments (as allowed in Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act) as a transition outcome is paramount to making CIE a reality for the students we serve. The expectations at sheltered workshops are merely too low; in order for students with disabilities to reach their vocational dreams, they must have high expectations set for them.

It is logical that increased expectations for students with disabilities is a common theme throughout the Transition to Careers section of the interim report. Ensuring that the parent(s)/guardian(s), as the child’s first teacher, are provided with accurate information and services early in the educational process will enable them to develop the expectation that their child can obtain CIE. The recommendation that “‘Highly Qualified Special Education Teacher’ should be redefined to reflect the unique skills necessary to effectively plan and provide required transition services that lead to CIE outcomes . . .” (Area 5, Section 24) provides the common focus on employment necessary to optimize involvement of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) at the “earliest stage of transition” as recommended in the interim report (Area 1, Section 4b). While “self-advocates” are mentioned briefly as mentors in the “Transition to Careers” section of the report, adults with disabilities who are successfully employed in integrated setting should be utilized as mentors to the student, the family and other team members throughout the transition process. Their experience could prove to be invaluable. This is a strategy we often use at BLIND, Inc. Students who have just begun the program learn incredible amounts from students who have been in the program for several months. Mentoring can go a long way, especially for families who have not yet realized all of the opportunities available to their transition-age child.

The interim report offers some compelling data regarding the benefits of transition students completing a CIE experience while in high school. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) may increase summer employment opportunities through VR supported programming. Extended school year options should also be explored. Rather than defaulting to programs such as AbilityOne, community partnerships with businesses that collaborate with the local high school could offer a variety of employment opportunities for students with disabilities. These employment experiences will allow students to explore options, providing them with a wealth of practical experience.

Too often students with disabilities lack employment experience making it increasingly difficult to obtain employment as an adult. As a blind person I was fortunate to have jobs in high school. While they did not turn into a career, they did give me a foundation of work experience to build upon. The solutions contained in the “Transition to Careers” remedy this barrier to employment.

Future generations of high school students with disabilities can build their own foundation of work experiences finding strengths, improving weaknesses and determining the direction they want to go in the future.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this testimony.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dan Wenzel". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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